

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 4718

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, TS

SUBJ: MASMOUDI MAY BE RESTORED TO BOURGUIBA'S GOOD GRACES

REF: TUNIS 275, JAN 16, 1974; A-141, OCT 1, 1974

1. SUMMARY: BANISHED FORMER FONMIN MASMOUDI IS SAID TO BE IN PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION WITH BOURGUIBA. IF TRUE, THIS REPRESENTS A MAJOR SHIFT SINCE LAST SEPTEMBER, WHEN EXCHANGES OF WORDS IN PRESS SEEMED TO CONSTITUTE DEFINITIVE BRIDGE-BURNING BETWEEN THE TWO. BUT BOURGUIBA HAS OFTEN SHOWN SUCH FLEXIBILITY IN THE PAST, AND HE MAY SEE ADVANTAGES TO TUNISIAN SECURITY IN MAKING A DEAL WITH MASMOUDI WHOSE CONTACTS, ESPECIALLY IN LIBYA, HAVE CONCERNED GOT. END SUMMARY.

2. MOHAMED MASMOUDI, REMOVED AS FONMIN BY BOURGUIBA IN JANUARY 1974 AND READ OUT OF THE DESTROURIAN SOCIALIST PARTY IN SEPTEMBER 1974 IS SAID TO BE IN PROCESS OF BEING REHABILITATED BY BOURGUIBA. WHILE RUMOR MARKET HERE OFTEN CONTAINS SPECULATION REGARDING IMMINENT RESTORATION OF DISCARDED PRESIDENTIAL FAVORITES, PRESENT STORIES EMANATE FROM WELL-CONNECTED SOURCES AND SEEM CREDIBLE. THEY HAD MASMOUDI SCHEDULED TO MAKE UP WITH
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BOURGUIBA IN THE CONTEXT OF LATTER'S AUG 3 BIRTHDAY, A

TRADITIONAL TIME FOR PRESIDENTIAL CLEMENCY. ACCORDING TO THESE REPORTS, MASMOUDI HAS BEEN IN CONTACT WITH HIS STRONG SUPPORTER, WASSILA BOURGUIBA, IN PARIS, EVER SINCE HIS PUBLIC ARGUMENT WITH BOURGUIBA LAST SEPTEMBER (A-141). WASSILA, RECUPERATING FROM GALL BLADDER OPERATION, IS SAID TO BE PLANNING RETURN TUNIS ABOUT AUG 15, AND MASMOUDI IS EXPECTED RETURN SHORTLY THEREAFTER. IT IS SAID THAT NEWS OF MASMOUDI'S REHABILITATION MAY BE CONCEALED FROM THE PUBLIC, OR AT LEAST NOT OFFICIALLY ADMITTED, FOR A FEW MORE MONTHS.

4. IF ACCURATE, THESE ACCOUNTS REFUTE OBSERVERS WHO CONSIDERED MASMOUDI HAD DEFINITELY BURNED HIS BRIDGES TO BOURGUIBA THROUGH HIS USE OF THE FRENCH PRESS TO MAKE VITRIOLIC ATTACKS ON PARTY DOGMA AND CHARGES OF DISHONESTY BY SENIOR GOT OFFICIALS. BUT BOURGUIBA IS AS WELL KNOWN FOR HIS FLEXIBILITY IN ACCEPTING HIS OPPONENTS BACK INTO THE FOLD AS HE IS FOR HIS WILLINGNESS TO "DISGRACE" MINISTERS WHO SEEM TO BE GAINING TOO MUCH INFLUENCE.

5. COMMENT: IN OUR VIEW IT REMAINS MOST UNLIKELY THAT MASMOUDI WILL BE TAKEN BACK INTO THE GOVERNMENT, AT LEAST WHILE HIS REPORTEDLY IMPLACABLE FOE HEDI NOUIRA RUNS IT. HIS RESTORATION COULD TAKE THE FORM OF FREEDOM TO COME AND GO IN TUNISIA, AND A GOT UNDERTAKING TO DISCONTINUE LEGAL ACTIONS REPORTEDLY STARTED AGAINST MASMOUDI'S CLOSE RELATIVES IN CONNECTION WITH ALLEGEDLY ILLEGAL REAL ESTATE TRANSACTIONS. SO FAR AS WE KNOW, MASMOUDI'S "SINS" HAVE NOT BEEN DISCUSSED BY BOURGUIBA IN A PUBLIC SPEECH, OR IN THE LOCAL PRESS, FOR THE PAST TWO MONTHS. MASMOUDI'S RESTORATION AT THIS TIME WOULD BE CONSISTENT WITH GOT DESIRES TO REDUCE A LIBYAN-BASED THREAT TO TUNISIAN SECURITY, SINCE MASMOUDI'S FREQUENT CONTACTS IN TRIPOLI, SOME OF THEM IN CONNECTION WITH TUNISIAN SUBVERSIVE GROUPS, HAS BEEN A SOURCE OF CONCERN TO GOT. ALSO RELEVANT IN THIS CONTEXT MAY BE STORIES WE HAVE HEARD THAT AHMED BEN SALAH, THE OTHER PROMINENT TUNISIAN IN EXILE, HAS BEEN ATTEMPTING TO FIND COMMON GROUND WITH MASMOUDI AS WELL AS WITH VARIOUS RADICAL TUNISIAN GROUPS, TO FORM A SINGLE, STRONGER

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OPPOSITION TO BOURGUIBA'S GOVERNMENT.
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